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## AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS OF DISTRICT MANSEHRA

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study was conducted in district Mansehra in the year 2010 to investigate the position of women followed by involvement in socioeconomic activities. For analysis primary data were collected through questionnaire using a sample of size one hundred and sixty allocating to eleven villages of the district on the basis of stratified random sampling technique. Focus was given to reflect their role in connection with their problems in the major areas like access to resources, autonomy in power, cultural responsibilities, household management, natural resources management, cultural ceremonies, access to basic facilities and harassment and violence against women. Based on the findings of the study, men were dominant in decision making and arranging socioeconomic activities as against the passive role of women. Liberty for women, opportunities for active participation and access to basic facilities along with social awareness about their basic rights were recommended.*

### Introduction

Women are the foundation stone of the whole society in general and for the family in particular. Women play multi-dimensional roles, say as a mother, a sister and a wife who socializes, educates, loves, feeds and supports individuals of the family with devotion, affection, love, sincerity, obedience and above all in esprit de corps (Iqbal and Atia, 2002). In balanced and equitable societies, people have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potential to contribute to

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national, political, economic, social, and cultural development, and to benefit from the results. Cultural and socio-cultural factors have significant impact on equity issue in general and particularly in rural areas. Women face a lot of problems and unbalanced status in the socioeconomic activities of rural areas. They are considered to play passive role in society. However, the participation of women varies in different ethnic groups. The investigated region hosts different local ethnic groups: Swati Khans, Syeds and Awan in the lower communities and Gujars in the upper communities. Swati and Syeds are mostly owners of agricultural and forestland whereas Gujars and Awans are mostly tenants. This is a traditional area where women and marginalized landless people are restricted to openly play their role in the natural resources management activities and other decision-making process. However, there is some liberty in the upper communities where Gujars are residing. According to Anwar, 1998, most of the Pakistani women along with their household chores and other socio-cultural responsibilities also perform agricultural and related activities. Rural women constitute about 50% of the total population. Mamoona, 1997, reported that in Pakistan, like in other countries, women play an important role in forestry. Ella, 2003, reported that in Philippines women play a significant role in harvesting some of the country's Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Bajracharya, 2001, reported that women in Nepal largely concentrate in household enterprise, so they played an important role in agricultural production and land use. Furthermore, the perceptions of gender in rural communities are manifested in daily life through gestures, rites, and practices. Many women encounter social, economic, institutional and cultural barriers that should be done away with and the women motivated and given moral and material support at

family, community, regional and international levels to continue their good work (Odeny, 1999). In the present study attempt has been made to assess and investigate the status of women in rural areas of Hilkot watershed, Mansehra.

### **Material & Methods**

District Mansehra was the universe of the study. Eleven villages of Hilkot watershed namely, Hilkot, Syedabad, Kandi, Naka Sher, Sumbul, Bojri, Sathan Gali, Guldehri, Kund, Dheri Number Daran and Kotni were selected for the relevant information. In each of the eleven villages of the watershed 17% of the households were interviewed. Stratified random sampling technique was used to collect the primary data through structured questionnaire using a sample of size n=160. Female respondents comprised 50% of the total respondents. The interview schedule was structured in English language but the questions were asked in local language (Pushto or Hinko) for the convenience to obtain reliable and required information with maximum accuracy.

### **Results & Discussions**

As the study was theoretical in nature, the following observations were made.

**Access to resources:** It was observed that women had no free access to income, credit, property management, education and training. They were in trap of socio-cultural barriers. Their contribution in the socioeconomic activities was low as compared to men involvement. They bounded to act upon the orders of their husband and family heads. However the trend of liberty tended to increase due to media communication and education. But still most of the women were

considered responsible for childcare and home practices. Those who used to practice Govt. service had no free choice to utilize their salaries. They were not independent to spend their income for business activities. Men were considered the undisputed heads of the family and thus made all the important decisions. Women make the decisions when it comes to saving money, but men make decisions about expenditure.

***Autonomy in power:*** The women in the research area were not independent in decision-making. They were not possessing equal opportunity of political and economic power. However, the Govt. policy of women participation in election brought significant improvement in their involvement in politics. The local body elections gave far-reaching results for women status in politics.

***Cultural responsibilities:*** In the research area women used to perform usual socio-culture responsibilities. None of the women folk of the household normally worked for wages in the district. They used to help with the family cultivation and to do exchange work on the wheat lands of friends and kin, but apart from that their work was in the home. A wife was considered to be good who was able to sew, at least the children's clothes, as well as cook, wash and keep the home scrupulously clean. Women in the most ethnic group engaged in craft production for family use and sometimes for sale. Beyond that, Mansehra's women generally hold principal responsibilities for household maintenance and childcare.

***Participation in cultural ceremonies:*** Women played active role in traditional and cultural activities of the district while men' role was passive. Women generally carried out arrangements of marriages.

Shopping for such activities were dealt be women members of the family. Women members of the family performed purchase of jewelry, furniture and food for such arrangements. Similarly in death ceremonies women also contributed a lot but all those activities were limited to home boundaries.

**Household management:** The women in the research area had no choice of having children or not, when and how many. They were also not independent to provide education, health and other facilities for their children. There was no free access to medically safe means of contraception and easy access to legal and medically safe abortion. Men members of the family usually paid medical expenses for maternity. There was also a lack of financial support for divorced women. The courts of the research area made clear the majority of family cases were claimed from women. Furthermore, there was no special assistance for never-married single mothers.

**Participation in natural resources management:** The contribution of women in natural resources management practices was of great significance. Women played significant role in the major agricultural related activities like sowing, land preparation, harvesting, weeding, fodder collection, gross cutting, fertilization, transportation, irrigation and marketing. Forest activities were also dependent on female members of the family.

**Women access to basic facilities:** In the study area it was observed that women were not independent to make access to basic facilities like health, education, job opportunities and social dealings.

**Harassment and violence against Women:** In some cases sexual harassment of women in places of work and of education was also

observed. According to personal observation violence against women in the whole society in general and particularly in the households were increasing.

### **Conclusions**

The study revealed that women status was substandard in the research area. They were not independent in accessing the resources, power and basic facilities. Furthermore, their contribution in socio-cultural activities was remarkable. But still they had the problems of autonomy, access to basic facilities and harassment and violence against women. To this end, support from health care officials, policy-makers, donor agencies, women's organizations, the news media, and religious and community leaders were needed. Awareness through media regarding leadership skills, self-awareness, women's health, communication skills, and women's social, economic, and political rights were recommended.

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